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Nation's
Restaurant News®
The Weekly Newspaper of the Food-Service Industry

Vol. 23, No. 28 | Published every Monday by Lebhar-Friedman Inc.; $3 a copy, $29.50 a year | July 10, 1989

Slump knocks fine dining off course

Operators veer in new directions to reverse sales downturn

By Peter Romeo

With consumers forsaking elegant restaurants for more-casual and less-expensive places, many high-end operators are struggling to regain a following with steps that promise to radically alter the course of fine dining.

"Fine dining is not dead," declared Michael McCarty, whose Michael's reigns as one of Los Angeles' most expensive restaurants. But "the gangbuster days are definitely over."

The segment's contenders noted that a shakeup is in mid-shudder, with even such luminaries as Jean Banchet hanging up their toques. The world-famous chef recently sold Le Français, a shrine of classic French cuisine, to serve as a consultant on such projects as a new country-style place in Florida.

Other veterans are distancing themselves from fine dining by adding lower-cost selections to menus that might not have even listed prices in more robust years. And several high-end operators are revamping their culinary palaces into informal hangouts where patrons don't worry about using the correct fork.

Such prominent restaurateurs as Jeremiah Tower and Jonathan Waxman have already veered in a more-casual direction, and the list of downscalers seems to grow daily. Michael and Robert Foley, operators of the smartly appointed Foley's in Chicago, have just aired plans to convert the place into an informal cafe.

Brendan Walsh, one of New York's most renowned young chefs, says his strategy is to "go low" in his soon-to-open BW's Tavern. Noting New York's "overabundance of high-quality, stuffy dress-up restaurants," he described his new venture as "a place people would think about going to

(See INDIES, page F6)

Fine dining at a crossroads

Restaurateurs take a more informal approach to attract a variety of customers

Full report appears in Focus

FOOD WATCH

Queen of the veggies

BURLINGAME, Calif. — White asparagus, sometimes called The Netherlands' "queen of vegetables," was recently featured in a variety of appetizers, salads, and side dishes at Veronique's Restaurant in the San Francisco Airport Marriott.

The specialty produce was flown in fresh from The Netherlands several times a week during the three-week promotion.

Sous chef Steve Kaiser said white asparagus specials included a classical version consisting of eight poached stalks garnished with Westphalian ham and chopped egg whites, yolks, and parsley ($6.95). Also served were a white-asparagus salad with radicchio, bibb lettuce, and lemon vinaigrette ($4.95) and a cocktail with citrus vinaigrette, created by arranging asparagus tips and orange and grapefruit sections in a glass ($5.95).

— Alan Liddle

Hanson to sell Ground Round to N.J.-based food processor

By Peter Romeo

SOUTH WEYMOUTH, Mass. — Hanson PLC has agreed to sell its Ground Round family restaurant chain to International Proteins Corp., a New Jersey-based food processor, for $97.2 million in cash and stock.

Hanson described the deal as "part of a business combination" between buyer and seller, with Hanson to receive 2.9 million newly issued International shares as well as $53 million in cash. The stock transfer would boost Hanson's stake in International to 49 percent from 9 percent.

The two companies already share a top official, David H. Clarke, and use the same bank and accounting firm.

The 215-unit Ground Round chain, which is based here, generated systemwide sales of $259 million for the fiscal year ended in September and has projected that it would garner a total of $300 million in fiscal 1989. The franchisor, which operates 177 units, received $209 million of the fiscal '88 tally, which yielded an operating profit of $7.4 million, according to Hanson.

It projected that Ground Round's assets would have a value of $55 million when the transaction is consummated in the fall.

(See GROUND ROUND, page 73)

New York exports hot Italian concepts

Ruggeri hits the road with Bice, storms Windy City in expansion push

By Carolyn Walkup

CHICAGO — Roberto Ruggeri has opened his fourth Bice restaurant here, betting he can duplicate his fine-dining operation, noted for sophisticated style, in the world's major cities.

In addition to restaurants in his native Milan — where his mother opened the first Bice in 1926 — New York, Sardinia, and now Chicago, Ruggeri plans to open similar operations in Beverly Hills, Calif.; Tokyo; Paris; and Toronto. He chose cities that are home to "sophisticated people who have traveled and . . . know Italian food."

He and some Japanese investors are prepared to spend whatever it takes to get the right locations. In Chicago they bought a building from an owner who would not lease it and added $1.5 million for opening costs, which included paying designer Adam Tihany to transform the space from Charlie Chiang's Chinese restaurant to Bice. Ruggeri hopes the site will be a high-grossing one, as is his approximately $5 million flagship on New York's East 54th Street.

Roberto Ruggeri

"This is the first time we bought a building. Normally, we try to make a

(See BICE, page 73)

California dreamin': Tihany takes Remi west, plans overhaul of NY unit

By Richard Martin

SANTA MONICA, Calif. — Noted designer and restaurateur Adam Tihany and his chef-partner, Francesco Antonucci, are closing their Remi restaurant on New York's Upper East Side and reopening it here with more seats and lower menu prices.

Then, after they complete the transcontinental transplant of the acclaimed trattoria by the end of the year, the partners will re-establish an even larger Remi with even lower prices in Manhattan's bustling West Side theater district. A third Remi is envisioned for Chicago later next year.

According to Tihany, growth opportunities for the Remi concept — not consumers' price resistance — are the motives behind the planned closure, relocations, and price-cuttings. Still, Tihany regards the trend to lower prices in high-ticket restaurants as "definitely a barometer" of recessionary fears, not competitive pressures. "There is somewhat of an economic crisis, and I don't think it's because there are [too many] restaurants," he remarked.

Francesco Antonucci

Tihany sees the downscaling drift in expensive operations as similar

(See TIHANY, page 73)

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Subscription rate: food-service operators and wholesalers-distributors, one year, $29.50, two years, $49.50; auxiliary (consultants, architects, designers, manufacturers, suppliers, and schools) and all others, $59.

Nation's Restaurant News (ISSN 0028-0518) is published weekly, every Monday except the last Monday in December, by Lebhar-Friedman Inc., 425 Park Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022. Second-class postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send change of address to: Subscription Department, Nation's Restaurant News, 305 Madison Ave., Suite 535, New York, N.Y. 10165-0079.

For change of address, please write Subscription Department, Nation's Restaurant News, 305 Madison Ave., Suite 535, New York, N.Y. 10165-0079. Six weeks' notice is requested. Please send old and new address and zip codes. If possible, include mailing label.

Vol. 23, No. 28 July 10, 1989

NEWS DIGEST

Boston's Lafayette taps Schutz to run Le Marquis

BOSTON — The Lafayette Hotel here has tapped chef Pierre Schutz, a young disciple of France's famed Louis Outhier, to run the kitchen of the hotel's top-rated Restaurant Le Marquis de Lafayette.

Schutz, formerly sous chef at New York's acclaimed Restaurant Lafayette, fills the gap left by Philippe Reininger's defection last winter to the rival Copley Plaza hotel. Reininger, who also cooked under Outhier's tutelage, was lured away to outfit the Copley with a top-drawer dining room.

In addition, The Lafayette Hotel named Alfred Nater as its new executive chef, with responsibility for all food-and-beverage operations except Le Marquis. He succeeds Urs Balmer, who has also moved to the Copley Plaza.

Outhier, one of France's most-acclaimed culinarians, continues to serve as master chef of Le Marquis, with responsibility for shaping the dining room's menu.

Landmark La Pyramide reopens under new pair

VIENNE, FRANCE — La Pyramide, one of the world's most famous and influential restaurants until its closing two years ago, has reopened at its original site here under the tutelage of a young husband-and-wife team.

From the 1920s to the mid-1950s, the restaurant was the domain of Fernand Point, the mentor of such present-day culinary superstars as Paul Bocuse, Louis Outhier, and Alain Chapel. Point, a forefather of contemporary cooking techniques, is widely recognized as one of the most influential chefs of the past century.

The new La Pyramide is operated by Patrick Henriroux, a 31-year-old chef, and his wife, Pascal Henriroux. The landmark's new owners, a real estate company called Fonciere des Champs-Elysees, has expanded the restaurant's dining room and added an inn.

Pepsico launches program to let staffers buy shares

PURCHASE, N.Y. — Pepsico, the parent of Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bell, has initiated a new stock ownership plan that enables even low-level staffers to buy a stake in their employer.

Under the plan, called SharePower, Pepsico employees who work more than 30 hours per week are granted stock-purchase options worth 10 percent of the staffers' total annual compensation. The options in effect enable staffers to buy Pepsico stock anytime within the next 10 years at the price at which shares where trading on the day the options were granted.

Pepsico has trumpeted the move as a way to motivate staffers at every level of the organization.

ARG buys Hershel's for rehab into Spoons

NEWPORT BEACH, Calif. — Anwar Soliman's American Restaurant Group has purchased the seven-unit Hershel's Deli & Bakery chain and is converting six Southern California branches to the Spoons Grill & Bar concept.

American, whose other chains include Black Angus, Spectrum Foods, and Grandy's, bought Hershel's for an undisclosed price from Los Angeles restaurant magnate James A. Collins. He acquired the New York-style delis two years ago from founder Harold Butler through bankruptcy proceedings, after Hershel's defaulted on Collins' loan of $3.9 million.

Spoons features barbecue ribs, burgers, fajitas, and other Tex-Mex dishes at prices mostly under $6.95. It expanded to 13 units last month with the reopening of two former Hershel's units. Four other shuttered delis are scheduled to open as Spoons later this summer. American said it would sell the last operating Hershel's, in Troy, Mich.

Dunkin' mulls new defenses against takeover

By Peter Romeo

SOUTH WEYMOUTH, Mass. — Dunkin' Donuts said it might pursue an acquisition or "other business opportunities" to dodge a hostile takeover attempt by Cara Operations, the Canadian contract feeder, and Toronto millionaire George Mann.

In a securities filing the doughnut maker also disclosed that it might repurchase more stock shares than it had originally intended. Dunkin' has been acquiring common issues in an effort to boost the percentage of outstanding shares controlled by management and its allies.

Dunkin' detailed those possibilities shortly after formally rejecting a $43-per-share purchase offer from Cara and Mann's DD Acquisition Corp. The bake-shop operator called the bid "inadequate" and commented that it would be "inappropriate to sell the company now, in view of the expected future growth as an independent entity."

Earlier, Cara president Bernard Syron revealed that he had offered in a letter to meet with Dunkin' chairman Robert Rosenberg to discuss DD Acquisition's bid, which Syron termed "negotiable."

Rosenberg "did not feel a personal meeting was necessary" and spurned the overture, Syron told the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Chevys receipts save two kidnapping victims

SAN FRANCISCO — The night manager of a high-volume Chevys Mexican Restaurant here was recently forced to swap the business' daily receipts for the safe return of his girlfriend and roommate after gunmen kidnapped the pair.

A Chevys spokesman confirmed reports that the kidnapping began early June 26 when the manager and his girlfriend were confronted in the garage of his apartment complex by two gunmen wearing Ronald Reagan masks. The kidnappers forced their way into the manager's apartment, where they tied up the woman and the man's roommate. They ordered the Chevys employee to return to the restaurant for money.

The girlfriend and roommate, who reportedly had been bound, blindfolded, and forced into the trunk of a car driven by the kidnappers, were released unharmed.

ARA bolsters stake in Canadian feeder

PHILADELPHIA — ARA Services, the contract feeder based here, said it has purchased another block of stock in VS Services, a Canadian food-service management company, to bolster its stake to 64.8 percent.

Additional shares may be acquired as opportunities arise, ARA said. It did not reveal how much it paid for the 126,000 VS shares that were amassed during a recent week.

Delouvrier to open new hotel restaurant

NEW YORK — Christian Delouvrier, who atrracted attention while he was cooking for the Maurice restaurant in the Parker Meridien hotel here, has been hired by Nikko Hotels to open a new restaurant in the Japanese lodging chain's Essex House.

The planned place, to be called Les Celebrites, will reportedly feature French-Japanese cuisine. The Essex House features a plush French restaurant called Devereux's.

Delouvrier left Maurice when the restaurant overhauled its menu as part of a rejuvenation effort. He was most recently chef at a West Side restaurant called Raphael.

FINANCIAL NEWS

Furr's/Bishop's plans new concept development

By Rajan Chaudhry

LUBBOCK, Texas — Look for Furr's/Bishop's Cafeterias L.P., the nation's second-largest operator of cafeterias, to launch a new concept within a year, said C. Kenneth Turner, the company's vice president of strategic planning and treasurer and president of its new specialty group.

In what shapes up to be a major shift in strategy, the cafeteria operator has borrowed top talent from throughout its ranks to create a new subsidiary that will develop non-cafeteria operations.

The new unit — called the Furr's/Bishop's Specialty Group L.P. — will expand the Furr's Pie Kitchen & Restaurant concept, design new restaurant formats internally, and shop for new operations.

In some cases existing Furr's/Bishop's cafeterias will be converted to new concepts, Turner said, and the conversions won't be limited to poorly performing units.

"We would not necessarily go in looking for underperforming cafeterias," Turner explained, "but rather units that would have greater potential under another restaurant concept."

The specialty group is interested in acquiring restaurant companies as well as single units, Turner said, either for conversion or to operate existing concepts.

"We're looking for companies that have a good concept, a growing concept, and are dominant in their marketplace," he said. "We're also looking for companies that might have a collection of buildings or real estate or leases that could easily be converted to another concept."

Expansion is most likely in the Western half of the country, where the company's presence is strong, Turner said, although that's not a firm rule.

"We would not turn down an acquisition opportunity simply because it's not in a predefined trade area."

Turner noted that new concepts are under development and hinted that the company would stick with its strength.

"Naturally, cafeterias are part of the family dining segment," Turner said, "and that's a very good segment for us."

The initial units of any new concept will probably occupy converted cafeterias, he said.

The key to the specialty group's expansion will be the Furr's Pie Kitchens.

The company operates two Pie Kitchen restaurants — Country Kitchen-type diners that offer sandwiches and burgers, from $2.25 to $4.50; whole pies, priced between $5 and $6; and slices of pie from 89 cents to $1.25.

Some Pie Kitchens will also feature 20-foot salad bars.

The building that houses the newer of the two Pie Kitchens, opened in September, is 5,000 square feet and seats about 120. The group plans to duplicate the design in future Pie Kitchens, Turner said.

Among the Furr's/Bishop's veterans who will pull double duty with the specialty group are Rich Lahvik, director of marketing for the cafeteria operations and now vice president of marketing for the specialty group; Randy Egenbacher, vice president of real estate for the specialty group; and Jody Thornton and Don Noe, both vice presidents with broad operational responsibilities for the new group.

Despite the aggressive plans for diversification, Turner stressed that the 157-restaurant company has not turned bearish on its core business.

"We have not stopped growing the cafeteria business," he said.

Turner and company also said that they were aware of the potential danger of spreading themselves too thin.

"We've seen a lot of companies learn a lot of hard lessons in the industry," Lahvik said. "We will not let one side slip at the expense of the other. And if we have to add staff, that's what we'll do."

Collins' net income increases 13%

LOS ANGELES — Collins Foods International Inc. said increased customer counts, check averages, and unit volumes at its Sizzler and international restaurant divisions boosted net income 13 percent and revenues from continuing operations 10 percent for fiscal 1989.

For the year ended April 30, Collins posted a net income of $28.5 million compared with $25.2 million in 1988. The 1988 figure includes an aftertax gain of $1.2 million from Collins' sale of its Naugles business.

Revenues were $541.6 million in 1989 vs. $566.5 million the preceding year, which included $75.6 million from Naugles.

Collins said increased chicken prices and a higher minimum wage on the West Coast clipped profits at the company's domestic Kentucky Fried Chicken stores.

Collins operates 209 KFC units in the United States and operates or licenses 83 units internationally. Through its 64-percent-owned subsidiary, Sizzler Restaurants International Inc., Collins also operates or licenses 628 Sizzler restaurants.

For the April-ended fourth quarter, Collins' earnings increased 14 percent year over-year, to $7.3 million, before the gain from the Naugles sale raised last year's net income to $7.7 million.

Revenues for the fourth quarter advanced 10 percent, to $124.8 million.

FOOD PRICE OUTLOOK

Food prices outpace inflation rate

A combination of last year's drought, heavy export demand for American agricultural products, and worldwide shortages of a number of foods has pushed prices up faster than the general inflation rate. The Bureau of Labor Statistics placed the increase in food prices at the producer level (the old wholesale price index) at 7.1 percent higher than the beginning of the year. And the rate was 6.9 percent higher than the same period last year! **Fresh produce** led the gains, particularly **vegetables,** which were up 55 percent ahead of last year.

Expect **domestic cheese** prices to increase this year. Blame last year's drought, this spring's early dry weather, and competing products claiming greater share of available milk. On the other hand, the strengthening dollar may keep **imported cheese** prices stable or perhaps lower.

No matter how good some of the **canned and frozen vegetable packs** look this season, don't expect prices to drop until the pipelines are full again. That could take several months.

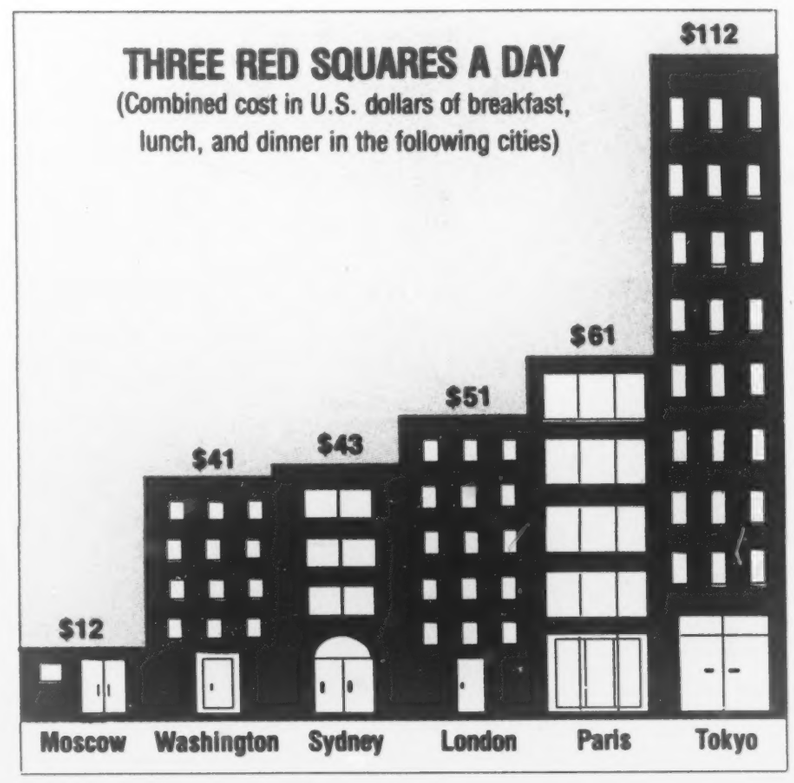
Salmon farms are continuing to increase their output of fresh fish. If the oil spill in Alaska has a strong adverse effect on the **pink salmon** catch, farmed fish output may help keep prices stable. One aquaculture economist recently predicted that tonnage of farmed salmon would exceed U.S. consumption of both fresh and frozen wild salmon by the middle of the 1990s. Look for increased interest in farming other species.

Both A and B grades of **frozen potatoes** are tight, with B grades tightest. With new packs not due until fall, some processors are out of the market, except for previous contracts.

— **Patt Patterson**

FACT FILE

A look at the statistics shaping the industry



Source: Runzheimer International. Meal costs include tax and tip.

NRN FINANCIAL DIGEST

Twistee Treat flirts with bankruptcy

NORTH FORT MYERS, Fla. — Twistee Treat Corp., which continues to experience substantial cash-flow difficulties and ongoing operational losses, said it is seeking investors to bail it out.

The company, which operates a chain of soft-serve ice-cream stores, said that if it can't find equity financing quickly, it may have to seek protection under Chapter 11 of the U.S. Bankruptcy Code.

In recent weeks Twistee Treat's shares have fallen to about 40 cents in over-the-counter trading from a 52-week high of $1.62.

Sizzler's profits rise 14% for year

LOS ANGELES — Sizzler Restaurants International Inc. said net income rose 14 percent, to $21.2 million, and revenues increased 7 percent, to $311.5 million, for the year ended April 30.

The company's traditionally weaker East Coast operations showed strong improvement, contributing to increases in chainwide average customer counts of 3 percent and per-restaurant sales gains of 7 percent.

Sizzler said that, for the fourth quarter, net income advanced 5 percent, to $5.9 million; revenues climbed 6 percent, to $75.2 million; and systemwide sales grew by 11 percent, to $203.8 million.

The company, which is 64 percent owned by Collins Foods International Inc., operates 628 Sizzler restaurants, 192 of which are company owned and 436 are franchised.

Sizzler restaurants feature steaks, salads, and seafood in a casual, upscale atmosphere.

Disney adopts shareholder rights plan

BURBANK, Calif. — Walt Disney Co. has adopted a shareholder-rights plan to discourage any hostile takeover attempt.

Under the policy, Disney — whose theme parks account for food-service revenues exceeding half a billion dollars — said one Series R preferred share would be issued for each of its common shares outstanding. In the event of an unfriendly takeover attempt, holders will be entitled to purchase stock in the company or an acquirer at half price.

The rights become exercisable if a hostile suitor acquires a stake of at least 25 percent in the company or if a tender offer would give it at least that amount. The rights will then entitle the holders to buy 1/100th of a share of a new series of preferred stock at an exercise price of $350 and give them the right to buy Disney common shares equal in value to twice the exercise price.

The rights will expire June 30, 1999, said Disney, and its board may redeem the rights for one cent each within 10 days after a suitor acquires a stake of at least 25 percent.

In addition to its newly adopted poison pill, Disney discourages takeover attempts by keeping a large portion of its shares in friendly hands.

FOCUS | OPINION

Nation's Restaurant News

is published by
LEBHAR-FRIEDMAN INC.
425 Park Ave., New York, NY 10022
212 371-9400
Subscription Services, ext. 379 or 419
Cable Address: LEBHAFRIED
Panafax: 212 838-9487

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Publisher of Nation's Restaurant News, Discount Store News, National Home Center News, Drug Store News, Accounting Today, Chain Store Age Executive (with Shopping Center Age), *AFPAREL merchandising*. Affiliates: Business Guides Inc., Lebhar-Friedman Books; Inside Retailing (Newsletter); Chain Store Age News, Japan; Largo Music Inc.

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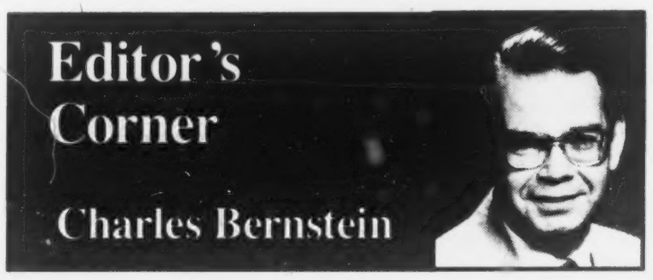
Alcoholic beverages: Political football?

The government is again attacking alcoholic-beverage consumption as detrimental and as a continuing major cause of drink-related accidents. One published estimate, which may be exaggerated but still dramatizes the point, is that 25,000 persons died in such accidents in 1988 and that 500,000 others sustained "serious injuries."

This is a shameful toll in the United States, and it demands further action. But while we might be in agreement with some of the new proposals (comprising some 200 ideas) that have been advanced, we believe that others really would not be effective.



Too much of the projected legislation would hurt the occasional light drinker, who does not pose any threat, but would do little to discourage the heavier drinker, who is dangerous on the road and a menace to society.

Under legislation advocated by retiring surgeon general Everett Koop and now being considered by Congress, federal excise taxes on beer, wine, and spirits would be sharply increased depending on the alcoholic content of each type of drink. The minimum tax would be 5 cents a drink.

The reasoning apparently is that liquor taxes have not been raised in four years and that the increases would keep pace with inflation. This could add $20 billion in revenues to the government's coffers.

Boosting excise taxes also would force operators to raise their prices, as the operators could not absorb the tax increases on their current base. This in turn would cut further into liquor sales — an obvious goal of the government.

If this program is adopted, it eventually could move society toward zero drinking and become another form of prohibition. In effect, the plan would discourage some people from an occasional drink, which is their right and does no harm to anyone.

Another provision would ban all happy hours. This, too, is a misguided effort, because nothing is wrong with people socializing after work with a snack and a light drink.

Perhaps the oddest provision is one that would reduce the permitted blood-alcohol content for drivers from 0.10 percent to 0.04 percent in stages over the next decade. The current level is generally accepted as a reasonable standard, and anything much lower would prohibit any drinking at all.

Many would cheer such a law, but it is simply going too far and is another move toward zero drinking.

Other sections of the proposed legislation seem constructive. They include the banning of "all-you-can-drink" promotions (a practice that does encourage overconsumption of alcohol), tougher statutes by which states would automatically revoke the driver's license of any person convicted of drunk driving, and extensive educational programs in schools and work places to stress the dangers of drinking and driving.

The recommendations, released last month, appear to be based on a special workshop, sponsored by Koop last December, focusing on alcohol abuse but not on alcohol use. Some of the solutions that emerged are actually aimed against responsible drinkers rather than problem drinkers.

What is even more incomprehensible is that not one of the 120 representatives of numerous groups interested in the DWI issue nobody was invited from the food-service industry. That seems unusual, since 25 percent of all alcoholic beverages are consumed at food-service operations.

We trust that food service will be represented and heard when Congress moves to its final conclusions on Koop's suggestions.

And we certainly hope that whatever bill does pass will emphasize educational programs dealing with the responsible use of alcohol.

It would be a politically motivated mistake to further threaten and penalize the responsible drinker and the responsible food-service operator with some of the unnecessarily harsh provisions that have been advanced.

LETTERS

Joe Edwards brought city sensibility to NRN

Editor, NRN:

I am deeply saddened by the passing of Joe Edwards.

His work for 10 years was a bright spot in your excellent newspaper. The urban sensibility that he brought to his responsibility — adventuresome, knowledgeable, and to the point — is the very essence of life in this great city of ours.

Joe provided a very special extra dimension. We will all miss him.

— Arthur C. Powers
president
Texas Tortilla Bakery
New York

Industry will all miss working with Edwards

Editor, NRN:

Your May 22 obituary story on Joe Edwards was most appropriate, comending his work and citing him as the fine person he was. We will all miss working with him.

— William J. Primavera
president
Primavera Public Relations
Yorktown Heights, N.Y.

Eloquent tribute honors a professional journalist

Editor, NRN:

A note to say how moved I was by your May 22 piece on Joe Edwards. You pay eloquent tribute to a man who did indeed add a lot to the excitement and professional rewards of reading your journal.

I was also touched to note that you kept Joe on full employment despite the ravages of his illness. What a good example to some of our colleagues in the industry!

Your May 22 issue is a fine one. Congratulations and thanks to you all.

— Alan G. Reyburn
president
A.G. Reyburn Associates Inc.
New York

Marilyn Collins battled odds to make it to top

Editor, NRN:

Your May 29 Editor's Corner column, "Too few women execs," identified a very real and troublesome problem in the food-service industry. Your points are well taken and appreciated. However, there is one omission from your list of four top women executives who should be mentioned.

As you reported in your May 15 issue, Marilyn Collins was named president of Valley Food Service Corp., a $50 million volume company. She is the first woman to head a major contract food-service company. She started as a registered dietitian with Valley in 1968 and worked her way up through the ranks in several operations positions, including chief operating officer in 1987.

Valley currently serves more than 100,000 meals daily in seven states and will soon be involved in significant expansion through new contracts.

As your article pointed out, Collins and other women who have risen to the top ranks of their organizations have done so against great odds. They deserve all the credit and recognition they can get.

— Philip Shirley
vice president of public relations
Godwin Group
Jackson, Miss.

Helping feed the hungry should be a daily affair

Editor, NRN:

I was pleased to see your June 5 editorial on restaurants' efforts to feed the hungry, and I agree with you that helping the hungry and homeless shouldn't be a one-evening, annual affair.

Thanks to the passage of "Good Samaritan" laws releasing food donors from liability in many states, perishable- food-salvage programs are starting up in cities all over the country. These programs pick up non-marketable food from restaurants and deliver it to the people in the community who need it most — at no cost to the restaurant.

Our program here in Tucson, called Tucson's Table, delivered more than 62 tons of food during our first year of operation, and our second year promises to be even bigger as the idea catches on. I sincerely thank each of our food donors who saw us through that first year and helped us find our way, and I urge all restaurateurs to start a relationship with a perishable-food-salvage program in their city.

As Charles Dudley Warner said, "It is one of the beautiful compensations of this life that no one can sincerely try to help another without helping himself."

— Janet K. Miller
program manager
Tucson's Table
Tucson, Ariz.